

Saint Nicholas, Kriss Kringle, the Christ Child and the Christmas Tree
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Hare Krishna. The following is some information on the not so well known origins of some of the traditions of the celebration of Christmas. The original text is presented herein as it is with no changes to spelling, grammar or sentence structure.



Saint Nicholas

According to Hone's "Ancient Mysteries" Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, was a saint of great virtue and piety.... The old legend is that the sons of a rich Asiatic, on their way to Athens for education, were slain by a robber innkeeper, dismembered, and their parts hidden in a brine tub. In the morning came the Saint, whose visions had warned him of the crime, whose authority forced confession, and whose prayers restored the boys to life. The Salisbury Missal of 1534 contains a curious engraving of the scene, in which the bodies of the children are leaping from the brine tub at the Bishop's call even while the innkeeper at the table above their heads is busily cutting a leg and foot into pieces small enough for his purposes.

Ever since, St. Nicholas has been the special saint of the school-boy, and certain of the customs of montem [1] day at Eton College are said to have originated in old festivals in his honor.

St. Nicholas is the grand patron of the children of France, to whom he brings bonbons for the good, but a cane for the naughty child. In Germany he acts as an advance courier examining into the conduct of the children, distributes goodies and promises to those with good records a further reward which the Christ Child brings at Christmas time. But his own peculiar celebration takes place in a tiny seaport of southern Italy where it is curiously interwoven with ancient usages possibly remaining from some worship of Neptune.

On St. Nicholas's day, the 6th of December, the sailors of the port take the saint's image from the beautiful church of St. Nicholas and with a long procession of boats carry it far out to sea. Returning with it at nightfall they are met by bonfires, torches, all the townspeople, and hundreds of quaintly dressed pilgrims, who welcome the returning saint with songs and carry him to visit one shrine after another, before returning him to the custody of the canons [2].

W.S. Walsh quotes a writer in Chambers' "Book of Days" as saying: "Through the native rock which forms the tomb of the saint, water constantly exudes, which is collected by the canons on a sponge attached to a reed, squeezed into bottles and sold to pilgrims as a miraculous specific [3] under the name of the "manna of St. Nicholas."



An Old Saint in a New World

While Catholicism prevailed, St. Nicholas was everywhere the children's saint. In Holland, where his personality was modified by memories of Woden, god of the elements and the harvest, he had a peculiar hold on popular affection which persisted into Protestant times. The children of the Dutch still believe that St. Nicholas brings the gifts that they always get on the eve of his titular day, December 6. In New Amsterdam this day was one of the five chief feastdays of the year. After New Orange became New York the characteristic traits of the Dutch children's festival were transferred to the near-by Christmas festival which was English as well as Dutch. It cannot now be said when the change began or when it was firmly established. It is known, indeed, that by the middle of the eighteenth century St. Nicholas Day had been dropped from the list of official holidays which, religious and patriotic together, then numbered twenty-seven. But, on the

other hand, more than one memoir and book reminiscences says that as late as the middle of the nineteenth century some conservative old Dutch families still celebrated the true St. Nicholas Day in their homes in the true old fashion, then bestowing the children's annual meed [4] of gifts. Nor is any light thrown on the question by certain entries in a local newspaper, *Rivington's Gazetteer*, dated in December, 1773 and 1774, and referring to celebrations of "the anniversary of St. Nicholas, otherwise called Santa Claus," for they speak of social meetings of the "sons of that ancient saint" in which children can hardly have participated, and they indicate days which were neither Christmas Day nor the true St. Nicholas Day.

It is clear, however, that on Manhattan by a gradual consolidation of the two old festivals Christmas became pre-eminently a children's festival presided over by the children's saint whose modern name, Santa Claus, is a variant of the Dutch St. Nicolaes or San Claas. In all European countries Christmas still means simply the day of Christ's nativity; for the "Old Christmas" whom we meet in English ballads of earlier times, the "Father Christmas" of Charles Dickens, and the "Pere Noel" of the French are abstractly mythical figures in no way related to St. Nicholas. But anywhere in our America the domestic observance of Christmas centres around Santa Claus with his burden of gifts. The stockings that our children hang on Christmas Eve were once the shoes that the children of Amsterdam set in the chimney corners on the eve of December 6; and the reindeer whose hoofs our children hear represent the horse, descended from Woden's horse Sleipner, upon whose back St. Nicholas still makes his rounds in Holland. The Christmas-tree is not Dutch but German; about the middle of the nineteenth century we acquired it from our German immigrants. But even this the American child accepts at the hands of Santa Claus, not of the Christ Child as does the little German. "Kriss Kringle," it may be added, a name now often mistakenly used as though it were a synonym of Santa Claus, is a corruption of the German Christkindlein (Christ Child). Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer from the *History of the City of New York*



The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ

When the world had endured five thousand and nine hundred years, after Eusebius the holy saint, Octavian the Emperor commanded that all the world should be described, so that he might know how many cities, how many towns, and how many persons he had in all the universal world. Then was so great peace in the earth that all the world was obedient to him. And therefore our Lord would be born in that time, that it should be known that he brought peace from heaven. And this Emperor commanded that every man should go into the towns, cities or villages from whence they were of, and should bring with him a penny in acknowledgement that he was subject to the Empire of Rome. And by so many pence as should be found received, should be known the number of the persons. Joseph, which was then of the lineage of David, and dwelleth in Nazareth, went into the city of Bethlehem, and led with him the Virgin Mary his wife. And when they

were come thither, because the hostelries were all taken up, they were constrained to be without in a common place where all people went. And there was a stable for an ass that he brought with him, and for an ox. In that night our Blessed Lady and Mother of God was delivered of our Blessed Saviour upon the hay that lay in the rack. At which nativity our Lord shewed many marvels. For because that the world was in so great peace, the Romans had done made a temple which was named the Temple of Peace, in which they counselled with Apollo to know how long it should stand and endure. Apollo answered to them, that it should stand as long till a maid had brought forth and borne a child. And therefore they did do write on the portal of the Temple: Lo! this is the temple of peace that ever shall endure. For they supposed well that a maid might never bear ne [5] bring forth a child. This temple that same time that our Lady was delivered and our Lord born, overthrew and fell all down. Of which christian men afterward made in the same place a church of our Lady which is called Sancta Maria Rotunda, that is to say, the Church of Saint Mary the Round. Also the same night, as recordeth Innocent the third, which was Pope, there sprang and sourced [6] in Rome a well or a fountain, and ran largely all that night and all that day unto the river of Rome called Tiber. Also after that, recordeth S. John Chrysostom, the three kings were in this night in their orisons [7] and prayers upon a mountain, when a star appeared by them which had the form of a right fair child, which had a cross in his forehead, which said to these three kings that they should go to Jersusalem, and there they should find the son of the Virgin, God and Man, which then was born. Also there appeared in the orient three suns, which little and little assembled together, and were all on one. As it is signified to us that these three things are the Godhead, the soul, and the body, which been in three natures assembled in one person. Also Octavian the Emperor, like as Innocent recordeth, that he was much desired of his council and of his people, that he should do men worship him as God. For never had there been before him so great a master and lord of the world as he was. Then the Emperor sent for a prophetess named Sibyl, for to demand of her if there were any so great and like him in the earth, or if any should come after him. Thus at the hour of mid-day she beheld the heaven, and saw a circle of gold about the sun, and in the middle of the circle a maid holding a child in her arms. Then she called the Emperor and shewed it him. When Octavian saw that he marvelled over much, whereof Sibyl said to him: *Hic puer major te est, ipsum adora. This child is greater lord than thou art, worship him.* Then when the Emperor understood that this child was greater lord than he was, he would not be worshipped as God, but worshipped this child that should be born. Wherefore the christian men made a church of the same chamber of the Emperor, and named it Ara coeli. After this it happed on a night as a great master which is of great authority in Scripture, which is named Bartholemew, recordeth that the Rod of Engadi which is by Jerusalem, which beareth balm, flowered this night and bare fruit, and gave liquor of balm. After this came the angel and appeared to the shepherds that kept their sheep, and said to them: I announce and shew to you a great joy, for the Saviour of the world is in this night born, in the city of Bethlehem, there may ye find him wrapt in clouts. [8] And anon, as the angel had said this, a great multitude of angels appeared with him, and began to sing: Honour, glory and health be to God on high, and in the earth peace to men of goodwill. Then shepherds, let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing. And when they came they found like as the angel had sail. In this time Octavian made to cut and enlarge the ways and quitted the Romans of all the debts that they owed to him. This feast of

Nativity of our Lord is one of the greatest feasts of all the year, and for to tell all the miracles that our Lord hath shewed, it should contain a whole book; but at this time I shall leave and pass over save one thing that I have heard once preached of a worshipful doctor, that what person being in clean life desire on this day a boon of God, as far as it is rightful and good for him, our Lord at the reverence of this blessed high feast of his Nativity will grant it to him. From *The Golden Legend*

The Christ Child

Elise Traut relates the legend that on every Christmas Eve the little Christ-child wanders all over the world bearing on its shoulders a bundle of evergreens. Through city streets and country lanes, up and down hill, to proudest castle and lowliest hovel, through cold and storm and sleet and ice, this holy child travels, to be welcomed or rejected at the doors at which he pleads for succor. Those who would invite him and long for his coming set a lighted candle in the window to guide him on his way hither. They also believe that he comes to them in the guise of any alms-craving, wandering person who knocks humbly at their doors for sustenance, thus testing their benevolence. In many places the aid rendered the beggar is looked upon as hospitality shown to Christ.



Origin of the Christmas Tree

A Scandinavian myth of great antiquity speaks of a "service tree" sprung from the blood-drenched soil where two lovers had been killed by violence. At certain nights in the Christmas season mysterious lights were seen flaming in its branches, that no wind could extinguish.

One tale describes Martin Luther as attempting to explain to his wife and children the beauty of a snow-covered forest under the glittering star besprinkled sky. Suddenly an idea suggested itself. He went into the garden, cut off a little fir tree, dragged it into the nursery, put some candles on its branches and lighted them.

"It has been explained," says another authority, "as being derived from the ancient Egyptian practice of decking houses at the time of the winter solstice with branches of the date palm - the symbol of life triumphant over death, and therefore of perennial life in the renewal of each bounteous year." The Egyptians regarded the date palm as the emblem not only of immortality, but also of the starlit firmament.

Some of its traditions may have been strongly influenced by the fact that about this time the Jews celebrated their Feast of Chanukah or Lights, known also as the Feast of Dedication, of which lighted candles are a feature. In Germany, the name for Christmas Eve is *Weihnacht*, the Night of Dedication, while in Greece at about this season the celebration is called the Feast of Lights.

As a regular institution, however, it can be traced back only to the sixteenth century. During the Middle Ages it suddenly appears in Strassburg; it maintained itself along the Rhine for two hundred years, when suddenly at the beginning of the nineteenth century the fashion spread all over Germany, and by fifty years later had conquered Christendom. W. S. Walsh in *Curiosities of Popular Customs*

Glossary of definitions from Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language Second Edition, Unabridged, 1951

[1] montem - noun - A custom practiced by the scholars at Eton College, England, of going every third year, on Whit-Tuesday, to a hillock (Salt Hill) near the Bath Road, and exacting "money for salt" from all passers-by and spectators, to assist in supporting at King's College, Cambridge, the senior scholar of the school.

[2] canon - noun - One of the clergy of a large church, whose name was entered on a canon, or list.

[3] specific - noun - *Medical* - A remedy exerting a peculiar influence over any part of the body; preventing or curing disease by a peculiar adaptation.

[4] meed - noun - That which is bestowed or rendered in consideration of merit; reward; recompense.

[5] ne - (a) adverb - Not. *Archaic*. Ne was formerly the universal adverb of negation. In the form n it was often prefixed to words as in nacheveth for "ne acheiveth." (b) conjunction, conjugation - Nor; also, or. *Archaic*. - ne...ne. Neither...nor. *Archaic*.

[6] sourd - verb - To have origin or source; to rise; spring.

[7] orison - noun - A prayer.

[8] clout - noun - (a) A patch of cloth, leather, etc; any piece of cloth; shred; rag; fragment. *Archaic*. (b) Swaddling clothes; - chiefly in plural.